

**West Mojave Plan
Supergroup Meeting
Green Tree Inn, Victorville
December 20, 2000**

Attendees

Supergroup:, Rob Ali, Ileene Anderson, Margie Balfour, Ray Bransfield, Kathy Buescher, Paul Condon, Mike Connor, Paige Donahoe, Karen Drewe, Gary Ethridge, Clarence Everly, Jeri Ferguson, John Gifford, Art Gleason, Al Guzman, Mark Hagan, John Hamill, Brian Hawley, Gerry Hillier, Grant Jensen, Peter Kiriakos, John W. Kittell, Paul Kober, Gene Kulesza, Manuel Joia, Becky Jones, Charles LaClaire, Laurie Lile, Roy Madden, Alan Manee, Sophia Merk, Art Miller, Brad Mitzelfelt, Steven P. Morgan, Stan Murphy, Lisa Northrup, John O’Gara, Lorelei Oviatt, William Presch, Mickey Quillman, John Rains, Karen Randall, Tim Read, Tim Reichl, Dave Reno, Tim Salt, Jim Schroeter, Randy Scott, Courtney Smith, Barbara Stein, Barbara Veale, Ed Waldheim, Scott Walker, Arden Wallum, Marcia Wertenberger, Martin Wilkins, Robert Williams, Mike Worley.

West Mojave Team: Bill Haigh, Larry LaPre, Ed LaRue, Valery Pilmer, Chuck Bell.

Introduction

Bill Haigh opened the meeting at 9:55 AM.

Task Group Accomplishments

- Task Group 1: Tortoise Strategy

Bill Haigh and Ed LaRue provided a summary of recommendations made by the Steering Committee and Task Group 1 to date (see memorandum “Task Group Process, Summary of Recommendations to Date” dated December 20, 2000). These recommendations resulted in revisions to the conservation areas and suggested conservation strategies. Ed LaRue is completing a table that compares the recommendations contained in the original Draft Evaluation Report with recommendations proposed by Task Group 1 and the subcommittees. This analysis will be used to determine what issues still need to be addressed, and will be reviewed by Task Group 1 to ratify, adjust, or address and fill in the gaps. Task Group 1 will meet on January 18, 2001 and again on February 23, 2001.

- General Strategy for Completing the Plan

Bill Haigh indicated the tortoise strategy should be wrapped up in the next couple of months. The Mohave Ground Squirrel strategy is being discussed by Task Group 1, and should be completed by early spring 2001. The conservation strategies for plants will be ready for release within the next few weeks and, together with birds and small reptiles and

mammals, will be addressed by Task Group 1 beginning late in the winter of 2001. Task Groups 3 and 4, focusing on plan implementation, have been deferred until the conservation strategy is complete. Scoping will begin in July with a draft environmental impact report and statement (EIR/EIS) ready for release about this time next year. **The consensus of the group was to proceed as outlined.**

Mike Connor indicated that the proposed strategy needs to be reevaluated in light of the Fort Irwin expansion. Bill Haigh responded that staff will prepare a recommended strategy that takes the expansion into consideration. This will be presented to Task Group 1 for discussion and adjustment as needed.

- Task Group 2: Vehicle Access Network Status

Bill Haigh outlined the basic approach for completing the vehicle access network. He indicated that the planning area has been divided into 20 polygons covering Class L and Critical Tortoise Habitat areas. A set of maps illustrating staff's suggested network, and a brief report detailing the rationale behind the network are being prepared for each of these polygons. The maps and report for the first of these polygons should be released in 4 to 6 weeks, followed by a 90 day field review period. Workshops will be held locally to introduce and discuss the proposed network. Comments received during the field review will be considered by staff as it revises the suggested network into the proposal to be addressed by the EIR/EIS next summer. **The consensus of the group was to proceed as outlined.**

The following comments were made:

- ▶ The vehicle access network will be integrated into the West Mojave Plan.
- ▶ Interested persons should check the West Mojave Plan website for upcoming Task Group 2 and workshop meeting dates. (Staff will work to ensure that the website and meeting schedules are kept up to date).
- ▶ There have been specific requests for vehicle access workshops in Ridgecrest. Bill Haigh indicated there will be workshops in Ridgecrest and throughout the remainder of the West Mojave Plan area.

Fort Irwin Expansion

Bill Haigh provided an overview of the legislation passed by Congress on Friday, December 15, 2000 (refer to the handout entitled "Ft. Irwin Expansion Legislation from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2000 [HR4577]"). The legislation was endorsed by Secretary of Defense Cohen and Secretary of the Interior Babbitt, as well as by both Congressman Jerry Lewis and Senator Diane Feinstein. President Clinton was expected to sign the legislation on December 21st. Bill pointed out that the legislation establishes a series of deadlines by which specific actions need to be taken as follows:

- 45 days after date of enactment A report shall be submitted to Congress that

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| | identifies the key elements of a proposed expansion plan (“Key Elements Report”) including a general description of conservation measures necessary to offset direct and indirect impacts of the expansion on listed species found within the western Mojave Desert. |
| • 90 days after date of enactment | The Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) must submit a preliminary review of the Key Elements Report. This review is not a Section 7 consultation, but is intended to assist in more precisely defining the nature and scope of the expansion plan in a manner that is likely to satisfy requirements of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) and expedite the formal consultation process under section 7. |
| • 120 days after date of enactment | Submit to Congress the proposed expansion plan and a draft of proposed legislation providing for the withdrawal and reservation of public land for the expansion. |
| • No later than 2 years after the date of enactment | Complete formal consultation required under ESA section 7. |
| • No later than 6 months following completion of formal consultation required under ESA section 7 | Complete any analysis required under the National Environmental Policy Act (to be coordinated with the review of the West Mojave Plan.). |

The proposed expansion of Fort Irwin and the West Mojave Plan are closely related. The FWS has determined that recovery of the tortoise within the western Mojave Desert must be addressed in the context of the West Mojave Tortoise Recovery Unit standing alone (that is, the West Mojave planning area), not by what happens to tortoise populations in other regions. Impacts to the desert’s tortoises must be offset within the planning area. Both the West Mojave Plan (including its habitat conservation plan component) and the decision to expand Fort Irwin involve major allocations of land uses within the western Mojave Desert which will directly affect tortoise recovery. Accordingly, the conservation strategy developed for the Plan must take into account, and be consistent with, the conservation measures necessary to offset the proposed expansion if either is to be effective.

Tim Salt, the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) California Desert District Manager, indicated that Congress has now provided direction for how to proceed on the expansion, and while all sides may not agree, we can now focus on the proposal and move forward with the West Mojave Plan. He added that the schedule contained in the legislation also gives the West Mojave Plan further impetus to move forward. The specific details of the relationship between the expansion proposal and the West Mojave Plan are being developed in a memorandum of agreement between the BLM and the Army.

The following are questions and comments from Supergroup members:

- ▶ Lorelei Oviatt asked whether the proposed expansion plan will be written so that it can be incorporated directly into the West Mojave Plan. Response (Tim Salt): Through this process we will be developing the alternatives that will be address through the West Mojave Plan.
- ▶ Questions were asked regarding the accuracy of and differences between various maps of the proposed expansion. Response (Bill Haigh): There is no final map as yet. A map posted on the wall represents the best understanding of the proposal. A more detailed and precise expansion plan and map will be the outcome of the process set out in the legislation.
- ▶ What was the \$75 million referenced in the legislation set aside for? Response: It can be used for a variety of conservation measures, including land acquisition and other mitigation. The details will be determined through the process outlined in the legislation.

Tim Reichl, Director of Military Programs for Charis Corporation and a consultant to Fort Irwin, presented a Power Point presentation on the National Training Center, including the need for the expansion and the uses to which the expansion area would be put. (Note: a hard copy of the presentation is available from the West Mojave planning team upon request.) The following questions and comments were made by Supergroup members after the presentation:

- ▶ Is the \$75 million provided for in the legislation an authorization or appropriation? Response (Bill Haigh): An authorization. Does that mean the administration must go back to Congress for an appropriation? Response: Yes.
- ▶ What happens if the dates outlined in the legislation slide? Response (Tim Reichl): There is no penalty, however, the parties will try to keep to the schedule. Doing the process "right" will take precedence over the schedule, however.
- ▶ John Gifford, the Army's lead consultant for the expansion, stated that the expansion area shown will be the preferred alternative. Other alternatives will be looked at as well.
- ▶ How much private land is within the expansion area? Response (Tim Reichl): 12,000 acres, most of which is Cattellus land.
- ▶ How will the expansion area into East Gate be used? Response (Tim Reichl): East Gate will be a staging or logistical support area. This would allow for additional training area in those locations where logistics and staging are currently placed.
- ▶ Will the public be able to see training activity from Highway 127? Response (Tim Reichl):

No.

- ▶ Will additional appropriations, beyond the \$75 million identified in the legislation, be provided to acquire private land within the expansion area? Response (Tim Reichl): Yes. Funding for private land acquisition would be separate from the \$75 million mitigation funds.
- ▶ Is there potential, through the process, for more than \$75 million to be allocated for mitigation funds? Response (Tim Salt): Legislation says “anticipated to be approximately” \$75 million. If more is really necessary, this would need to be adjusted.

Ed LaRue made a presentation on the biological issues related to the proposed Ft. Irwin expansion. The following points were made during the presentation:

- Although less impacting than the April 1999 expansion proposal, the current proposal still affects tortoise populations and a sizable area of critical habitat.
- In response to the April 1999 expansion proposal, \$75,000 was provided by DOD to fund tortoise surveys to “fill in the blanks” from previous surveys. 1500 transects were completed to determine tortoise density. These surveys were focused in the areas within Army’s April 1999 expansion proposal.
- Staff has not yet looked in detail at the effect of the new expansion proposal on the tortoise.
- A March 15, 2000 report was prepared by a panel of tortoise experts which examined the effect of the April 1999 expansion proposal on the tortoise. This report needs to be revisited in light of the new expansion proposal.
- LaRue has reviewed each of the 75 technical papers which examine the effects of Fort Irwin’s training maneuvers on biological resources. A report summarizing the findings of those papers is about 90% complete. This document will provide a baseline of information for those working on the EIR/EIS.
- Transects within the expansion area found live tortoises. What will happen to animals within the expansion area? Would part of the \$75 million go to solving this issue, or would additional money be set aside to address it?

The following are questions and comments from Supergroup members in response to the presentation:

- ▶ Becky Jones (California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG)) asked whether a map is available that shows encounters with live tortoises. Response (Ed LaRue): The information is available. LaRue then projected a computer image map showing the results of surveys done in 1998 and 1999. The map shows live tortoise as red dots, and dead tortoises as yellow. Some areas had good numbers of live tortoises in 1990, but show die offs more recently. We don’t understand what is affecting populations in this area.
- ▶ Were surveys done inside the current NTC boundary? Response (Ed LaRue): Yes. The West Mojave Team conducted surveys in 1999, and found little tortoise sign. Surveys done by Chambers Group in the early 1990s also found little inside the boundary.
- ▶ Are we proposing to relocate tortoises out of the expansion area? Response (Ed LaRue):

Best example of translocation exists in Clark County, Nevada (Las Vegas region). Several thousand tortoises have been translocated there, however, scientists say that after 3 years of experience it is still premature to say if it is working or not. The main question is where to place the tortoises if they are moved out of the expansion area.

- ▶ What is the cost of translocation? Response (Ed LaRue): Not certain. Dr. Berry has cited estimated costs of \$2,500 to \$10,000 per animal.
- ▶ Can the cost of translocation be determined based on the Clark County model? Response (Ed LaRue): That program is different enough from West Mojave that any comparison is difficult.
- ▶ Has there been evidence of disease in tortoises in the Silver Lake/Kramer Hills area where urban influence is greater? Response: (Ed LaRue): We weren't looking for evidence of disease when that area was surveyed, however, experts suspect that the population at Fort Irwin is relatively less infected than other areas.
- ▶ Becky Jones (CDFG) stated that if translocation takes place, CDFG recommends that tortoises be translocated outside the Tortoise DWMAs (desert wildlife management areas), not within the recovery area.
- ▶ Have we calculated the number of animals inside the expansion area? Response (Ed LaRue): No. Dr. Boarman has indicated that the survey data collected is insufficient to determine the number of animals.
- ▶ Will a portion of the \$75 million go towards headstarting, and would headstarting not be allowed within the Tortoise DWMAs? Response (Ed LaRue): Headstarting could take place within the Tortoise DWMAs. This is a different issue than translocation. Ray Bransfield (FWS) added that FWS is less than enthusiastic about headstarting, and feels that not enough is known about it to rely on it for recovery.
- ▶ What about the Lane Mountain Milk Vetch? Response (Larry LaPre): This plant exists in and adjacent to the expansion area. Only 840 individual plants are known in three areas. Of the three populations, the two larger populations are within the expansion area, and the one smaller area is outside. Approximately 90% of the known plants are within the expansion area. They are very difficult to survey, and it is highly likely they will be found in other localities. Transplanting might be possible, but is generally not acceptable. During the next year much research will take place. The plant prefers granitic outcrops with shallow soil. Other areas with similar soils will be surveyed.
- ▶ What are the Research Natural Areas (RNA) proposed for? Response (Ed LaRue) The purpose of the two proposed RNAs is to determine the off site affects of the expansion on tortoise population. Distance sampling of long term trends of tortoises will occur in these areas.

Next Steps in the Process

Bill Haigh indicated that \$2.5 million was appropriated to the BLM in the recent Ft. Irwin expansion legislation. These dollars will be available to take care of much of what we are doing to complete the West Mojave Plan. As more information is available, it will be shared with the Supergroup and Task Groups. Documents will be placed on the West Mojave web page as they

become available.

Bill Haigh asked the Supergroup whether it was acceptable to allow the Steering Committee to review the Key Elements Report and other pertinent documents, and to determine how best to proceed with the West Mojave planning process in light of Fort Irwin developments. He asked whether this approach was preferable, or whether the Supergroup itself should meet within the next month to discuss this issue. Haigh noted that Task Group 1 would be meeting on January 18, 2001 and on February 23, 2001, so some mechanism to guide the work of the task group should be established. **It was the consensus of the group that the Steering Committee should be empowered to react to Fort Irwin developments and provide guidance to the Task Group.** Depending upon events, the Supergroup should meet at an appropriate time within the next couple of months.

“Alternative Futures” Presentation

Clarence Everly, representing the Department of Defense, gave a presentation entitled “Designing the Future. A Framework for Environmental Management Within the California Mojave Desert.” The focus of the presentation was a computer model designed to predict where urban growth is likely to occur within the Mojave Desert. The model is capable of testing various scenarios and displaying how those scenarios affect growth. For example, the model could test how a land swap or construction of a major road would affect growth patterns. Jeff Joyce (computer map specialist) assisted with the presentation, and outlined the six factors evaluated by the computer program in predicting growth patterns as follows: 1) Private lands; 2) Slope; 3) Urbanization based on satellite imagery of disturbance; 4) Distance to development; 5) Whether area is incorporated; and 6) Distance to secondary and main roads.

The following questions and comments were made by Supergroup members during the presentation:

- ▶ Was the availability of water taken into consideration by the model? How much expansion can occur without water? Response (Jeff Joyce): No. It is uncertain whether the variables could be changed to include additional factors, such as water.
- ▶ What has been done to ground truth the model? Some areas are shown as incorporated that are not (e.g. Rosamond). Response (Jeff Joyce): Nothing yet. The model is being presented to this group in the hopes of receiving input on the accuracy of the assumptions.
- ▶ There are more precise population forecast figures available through SCAG and SANBAG.
- ▶ Is the military using the model? Response (Clarence Everly): No, but the military does have some interest in it. Joshua Tree National Park has also expressed an interest.
- ▶ Nothing in the six variables evaluates economics. Many unforeseen events can affect where growth occurs.
- ▶ While the technology is impressive, I worry that the product is not much better than peoples’ gut instincts of where growth is likely to go. Is it really worth the expense?

- ▶ What is the application of the model to the West Mojave Plan? While forecasting growth is an important factor in planning for infrastructure facilities, why is it necessary to try and determine where growth will occur in the proposed take area for the West Mojave Plan? Some jurisdictions do not want to commit to a program that says “growth will go here - not there.”

The general consensus of the group was that the computer model had limited applicability to the West Mojave Plan, and recommended against committing West Mojave Team staff and financial resources towards further development of the model.

Adjourned for lunch at 1:15 pm.

Mohave Ground Squirrel: Suggested Conservation Strategy

Ed LaRue provided an overview of the proposed Mohave Ground Squirrel strategy for those who had not been previously briefed.